



Learning Circle

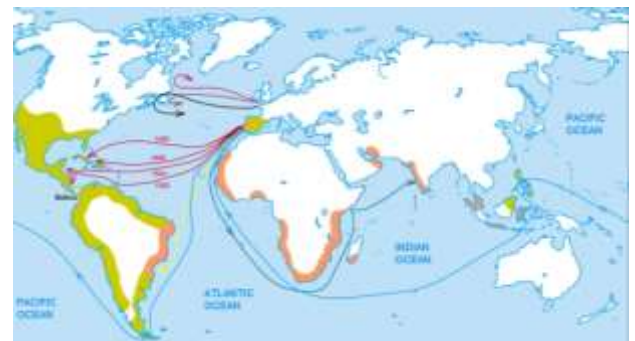
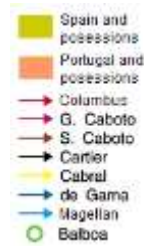
The Age of Exploration

During the 13-1400s in Europe, several factors came together resulting in population growth, economic growth and an ever growing market for 'luxury items' such as herbs, spices, silks and other imports from outside Europe that had been imported via the Silk Road (shown in general in the map https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Silk_route.jpg). By the mid-1400s these routes were blocked and controlled by the Ottoman and Mongol Empires. Improvements in sailing vessels encouraged European traders to venture further than the Mediterranean Sea in search of new trade routes to the "Indies" to get access to these luxury items and find new markets for trade. Many of us learned about these voyages in school including Columbus' "discovery" of the New World. A summary of several of these voyages by European explorers is included here



(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Age_of_Discovery_explorations_in_English.png)

The type of contact and relationships these explorers and subsequent traders developed depended on who they were dealing with. When they arrived at ports where there was a political (and military) hierarchy in place they worked on



establishing trade relations similar to what they were used to in Europe and the Near East (for example, in India, China etc.). When they encountered societies that were more loosely structured (and probably less militaristic) they were often able to create very favourable trading conditions for themselves at the expense of the local populations (as seen in many African settings).

And then there was North America. The first consistent contact with Europeans in North America (not counting the Scandinavian settlements that were attempted in Newfoundland) was seasonally along the Atlantic coast. Fishermen in large, ocean going sailing vessels started fishing along the shores of Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, PEI, etc., processing the abundant fish harvest on the shores and leaving again in the fall. The local indigenous peoples also fished along the same shores and these groups would have encountered each other as both groups were using the same resource. There were enough fish to go around (in those days) and there was probably some trading for goods that Europeans could provide (metal cooking pots, knives, woven blankets etc.) for furs or other items produced by local communities that made the contact welcome. Since the fishermen did not stay they did not have too large an impact on local food resources or local populations.

What the Europeans of that time did not realize was the huge difference in thinking about land, resources and sharing that exists in indigenous cultures that did not exist in European societies. Europeans would have seen these new lands as pretty empty and devoid of any “rule”. Europeans were used to a hierarchical society where everyone had their place. Authority was patriarchal and the economic system was essentially capitalism.

Indigenous societies were generally egalitarian (there were some exceptions), especially in this part of the continent. They did not see people as the “centre of the universe” the way that most Europeans did (remember – God gave us ‘dominion’ in Genesis). Status was not based on material wealth but rather on personal qualities or merit – skilled at hunting, good at tanning furs or weaving baskets.

Leaders were respected for their abilities to provide for the people in their care and to represent the common will. Chiefs were expected to lead by example and to be generous. In terms of material wealth, a chief could often be the poorest person in the group! A chief who no longer met people’s expectations or did something to lose their respect would lose their followers. Someone else would step into the role. Not understanding these essential societal differences around authority and status will lead to the conflicts that would come. And we haven’t even addressed the issue of politics – European views vs indigenous practices.

Before I finish this article, there is one more significant thing to mention. One of the most basic, essential differences between Europeans and Indigenous peoples is around land. Europeans owned land – at that time, a monarch would rule a nation and all its lands and peoples. The ownership of land was granted, inherited or purchased. But the land, and all its resources, could be *owned*. The indigenous concept of land is the complete opposite. The Creator created the land for all to use. The inhabitants of the land, whether two footed, four footed or winged, existed together on the land and used its resources equally, there was no ownership. Hunting, fishing and gathering was available to everyone. That is why the seasonal fishermen were probably not seen as a threat – they came and went and there were enough fish for all. This fundamental difference in viewpoint around land simply *cannot* be overstated because it is still central to the issues and challenges of reconciliation today.

This would all change as more Europeans arrived in North America. First to exploit more resources with the fur trade – which in turn led to the beginning of settlements. Then as more came to settle and farm and colonization truly began.

(Again, a good resource if you want to read more is *Indigenous Peoples within Canada – A Concise History* by Olive Patricia Dicason and William Newbigging)